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## Rhythm and Resistance

Peter Nelson

*As Gaston Bachelard notes, ‘The first specific instance of the notion of matter is resistance.’ (Bachelard 1953, p. 10) If we regard time as a material substance, we can ask what resistance does it offer, and how does that resistance frame our experience? The framing question, ‘what is it that’s going on here?’ (Goffman 1986, p. 8) does not have to refer only to ‘plot’: it can also refer to time – the question perhaps reframes as, ‘what are the temporal constraints or interactions here?’ You can observe this perception in a person who utters the phrase, “Don’t rush me!”, or alternatively “Get a move on!”. Neither of these concerns plot actions; only the experience of time, and the encounter with its resistances in the course of temporal interactions with other selves (Kohn 2013, p. 16). Discussion of rhythm often centres on issues such as ‘entrainment’, and I will argue here that entrainment registers a particular sort of temporal resistance. But entrainment does not account for many aspects of rhythmic practice and experience, as noted by Charles Keil (Keil 1987, pp. 275-283). In particular, the presence of meaning in rhythm is poorly accounted for. Heidegger, in his writing about technology, proposes the resistance of materials to human understanding and control as an energy towards revelation: towards the coming into being of sensations and realisations which challenge an existing order formulation (Heidegger 1993, p. 339). Order is thus seen as a tendency to resist the contingencies of actions and things by presuming to understand them already. A material account of time will try to show how rhythm constitutes a technology that reveals time in a general sense, and how rhythm in music, in particular, creates a play of meaning from the surface of time.*

*Keywords: time, rhythm, materiality, Bachelard, Ingold.*

The context of this conference rightly calls attention to ‘the role that objects, matter, and materiality have in music-making, history, and aesthetics.’ One might note, at the start, two aspects of the attention currently being paid to this notion of materiality: on the one hand, taking account of what Daniel Miller calls “stuff”, or material objects, acts as a counter to historically over-essentialised and metaphysical accounts of music-making. It also opens up the possibility of investigating the ways in which material objects actually come to *constitute* social relationships, rather than simply being the tools, playthings or commodities for human enterprises established without reference to them. On the other hand, the recognition of the importance of “stuff” has led writers like Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour to question the perceived hierarchy of the human over the material, and to develop a ‘flat ontology’ where humans and objects, and non-human living beings, can be regarded as equal ‘actors’ in the processes and events that characterise life on our planet.

I start with these two premises, partly to make explicit what I take to be the ground of today’s discussions, but also to begin an explanation of the slightly tricky nature of my own topic. I am going to talk about time, considering the way time is implicated in notions of rhythm, both musical rhythm and rhythm in general. I take a cue here from the Introduction to volume I of Olivier

Messiaen's monumental, *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie*, where he remarks, 'as a rhythmician, I've endeavored to divide this [human] time up and to understand it better by dividing it. Without musicians, time would be much less understood.' This passage is quite specific about rhythm concerning, not events *in* time, but the partition of time into ... what? It is in trying to find an angle on this question that I come to think about time as material.

But to speak of time in terms of materiality might seem at best curious. What is to be gained from this strategy? One gain, as with most discussions of materiality, could be the avoidance of metaphysical and analytic tropes in favour of a more pragmatic and physical approach. As Bruno Latour has warned us against excessive 'purification', thinking about time in material terms might help us to identify and get to grips with larger networks in which it participates; getting to know about time through its material interactions rather than through thinking about the thing itself. Another gain might be to make it easier to see the ways in which time *signifies* for us, since part of my contention is that time is not simply a matter of experience but also one of mediation: time actually conveys things to us: to paraphrase the chapter, "The Work of Time" in Pierre Bourdieu's *Logic of Practice*, it matters *when* things happen. There might also be disadvantages to this approach, but I am hoping at this point that they are not fatal to my discussion.

To think about materiality is to consider both raw material and the things that form from or are made with it, as well as the processes through which those things come to be, and the affordances they offer us. In this context, time can figure as a raw material from which things are constructed, made by natural process or human action into sorts of artefacts. To treat time as material is to open the possibility of thinking about its palpable, object-like qualities - if such exist - and part of my claim is that such qualities do exist, and that they can contribute something to the discussion of the phenomenon of rhythm. In addition, the 'flat ontology' opened up by recent writers, and in particular by those influenced by Latour's 'actor-network theory', raises the prospect of things as actors, rather than simply the objects of human interest, and thus we can come to consider time as an actor, rather than just as a phenomenal experience. It seems to me that, for rhythm to have the temporal properties we reportedly experience, time has to *do* something, and considering it as an actor might contribute some useful insights. Nevertheless, and following Graham Harman's exhortation to consider everything as an 'object', I take any object-ness of time to imply that time has its own, intractable and inexhaustible presence, that is absolutely resistant to a complete understanding; a presence which makes its impact on us through its qualities. Which qualities ought to concern us here?

I take the ideas of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard as a starting point, since his writing about time will later inform another key stage of the discussion. In his book, *Rational Materialism*, Bachelard writes, 'The first specific instance of the notion of matter is resistance.' (Bachelard 1953, p. 10) This speaks to our everyday experiences of hard objects, or even of the wind, but this is not just a straightforward pragmatism. As Sally-Jane Norman puts it, 'Resistance as a state or activity entwines discrete entities or forces in a given context (*contexere*, to weave together). Something or someone resists something or someone, making this withstanding (*re-sistere*) essentially relational or agential.' (Norman 2013, 275) Time is often presented as *pure duration* or *pure succession*: what McTaggart calls A-time and B-time. In Bachelard's account of the philosophy of Henri Bergson, 'duration that is full and deep, continuous and rich, serves as the spirit's substance.

In no circumstances can the soul separate itself from time; like all that are happy in this world, it is always possessed by what it possesses. Ceasing to flow would mean ceasing to subsist ...' (Bachelard 1950 [2016], 16) There is little sense of resistance here, yet if we are to regard time as a material substance, we need to ask what resistance does it offer, and how does that resistance frame our experience? I suppose you might observe some every-day perception of resistance in a person who utters the phrase, "Don't rush me!", or alternatively "Get a move on!". Those expressions cross the notion of pure duration, and register a desire to push time in response to our desires and our social relations. Our experiences of pain or sleeplessness, or of excitement or engrossed attention also persuade us that time offers resistances to our experience. In the words of Bruno Latour, "Time passes or not, depending on the alignment of other entities ..." (Latour 1997, 178) And we would be wrong to suppose that these temporal resistances we experience go unchallenged. Thus Roxana Moroşanu and Felix Ringel theorise what they call 'time tricking' as, "the many different ways in which people individually and collectively attempt to modify, manage, bend, distort, speed up, slow down or structure the times they are living in." (Moroşanu & Ringel 2026, 17)

In this discussion of time as a material 'stuff', subject to all the human interference suffered by normal stuff, I find myself in something approaching the opposite position to that of Tim Ingold in his defence of 'materials against materiality'. Where Ingold questions the scholarly concern for '*the materiality of objects*' rather than '*materials and their properties*' I have proposed a material time, with its own properties of resistance, but no clear idea of what an 'object' made of this material could possibly be. Surely part of the whole material turn in music studies is to bring actual objects, and the practices that engender and engage them, back into a discourse too readily concerned with non-objectified, metaphysical substances. It is true that sandstone, for instance, revealed through the work of Kyle Devine to be a critical material in the production of gramophone records, has certain material properties, associated technologies, geographical locations, commercial value and other - roughly speaking - materialist aspects worthy of study, but it is only really of interest to music scholars because of the object of the gramophone record. Why would we argue for a material account of time, if nothing object-like can be made of it? Yet time considered as raw material may not be as abstracted as we sometimes suppose. As Bruno Latour points out '... "time" is not something that is in the "mind" or that is "thought" by a mind, but something rooted in a long material and technical practice of record keeping, itself merged into institutions and local histories.' (Latour 1997, ) Thus Michelle Bastian, in her paper, *Liberating Clocks*, demonstrates the multiple disconnects between our understanding of time as a continuous flow, and the actual mechanisms, agreements, institutions and political negotiations that go into producing 'clock-time': in this sense, clock-time is every bit as much a human-manufactured piece of 'stuff' as anything else in Daniel Miller's category of material objects. One could add the social constructions of such temporal objects as: waiting times - as in the NHS; break-times - as in Amazon warehouses; and a host of other times that signify within the situations of particular people in very particular ways.

This desire, on my part, for a temporal, material 'object' arises out of the feeling that when we make music we are actually making *something*. Music is always supposed to be ephemeral and insubstantial, but it also has object-like resistances. If, as Charles Keil proposes, 'Music, to be

personally involving and socially valuable, must be “out of time” and “out of tune” (Keil 1987, 275), both timing and tuning figure as areas of resistance. Furthermore, the personal and social involvement suggested by Keil arises precisely from a *making* of both time and pitch. What I am arguing here is that neither of these phenomena are simply there, to be latched onto or somehow replicated automatically. And that this act of the *making* of music produces, out of the available and necessary materials, things with a certain ‘thingly’ quality, to paraphrase Tim Ingold. Furthermore, from the material of time, I want to make the claim that the ‘things’ we make signify, and that it is the signifying quality of each, sometimes tiny ‘time-thing’ that allows us to follow and to feel the effects of musicking. In this sense, I am not quite in agreement with Jonathan Kramer when he says that “music creates time”. In thinking about a material account of time, one might rather say that music creates things-out-of-time, and those things are ‘time-ly’ and have certain affordances for us. Thus, listening, for example, to Duke Ellington, Charlie Mingus and Max Roach playing *A Little Max*, I hear not so much a succession of sounds as a sort of temporal granularity. In conventional terms, there is a beat, which one could even clap along to, but sometimes it is not clear that anyone is actually playing on it. The sensation is of a scatter of tiny durations, like temporal pebbles of unequal size, and part of the beauty of the music is the appreciation of the shapes, relationships and resistances of these tiny ‘time-things’.

This ‘thingy-ness’ that I am associating with what I take to be human constructions with time is clearly present in Henri Lefebvre’s introduction to his late text, ‘rhythmanalysis: space, time and everyday life’ (Lefebvre 2004 [1992]). Never mind that the first section is entitled, The Critique of the Thing (Critique de la Chose), Lefebvre makes a point of treating rhythm - as he treated space already - in material terms: ‘The **relative** remains suspect, despite the discoveries of the twentieth century; we prefer the *substantial* to it (and we often make time a sort of substance ...)’ (Lefebvre *ibid.*,10), and then again, more mysteriously, ‘Our sensations and perceptions, in full and continuous appearances, contain repetitive figures, concealing them. Thus, sounds, lights, colours, *objects*. We *contain* ourselves by concealing the diversity of our rhythms ...’ (Lefebvre *ibid.*,10), and then finally, and perhaps more clearly, ‘... that which quite rightly connects space, time and the energies that unfold here and there, namely **rhythms**.’ (Lefebvre *ibid.*,18) There is a sense here that Lefebvre thinks of rhythm as some sort of flow or pulsation of energy, but it is the idea that that energy - whatever that is and however that arises - is *here* and *now* that I want to concentrate on. Is it really sensible to propose a ‘time-thing’ to account for this, and what possible benefits would that provide?

I want to return for a moment to Tim Ingold, and his defence of Materials Against Materiality (Ingold 2007). Ingold’s difficulty with considerations of material culture and the world of ‘stuff’ centres on his concern for living and dwelling, and his acknowledgment that humans are only one component in the living enterprise, thus:

I can touch the rock, whether of a cave wall or of the ground underfoot, and can thereby gain a feel for what rock is like as a material. But I cannot touch the materiality of the rock. The surface of materiality, in short, is an illusion. We cannot touch it because it is not there. Like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on the ‘other side’ of materiality but swim in an ocean of materials. Once we acknowledge our immersion, what this ocean

reveals to us is not the bland homogeneity of different shades of matter but a flux in which materials of the most diverse kinds – through processes of admixture and distillation, of coagulation and dispersal, and of evaporation and precipitation – undergo continual generation and transformation. The forms of things, far from having been imposed from without upon an inert substrate, arise and are borne along – as indeed we are too – within this current of materials. (Ingold 2007, 7)

This critique of the notion of materiality rests on a reading of James Gibson's book, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, where he distinguishes three components of the inhabited environment: medium, substances and surfaces

(Gibson 1979, 16). Ingold uses the notions of *substance* and *surface* to explore *things*, within the medium of the lived world, but since I am proposing that we consider time as if it were a material substance, how does that proposition hold up in this context? The critical term for me is surface, and, as Ingold relates,

All surfaces, according to Gibson, have certain properties. These include a particular, relatively persistent layout, a degree of resistance to deformation and disintegration, a distinctive shape and a characteristically non-homogeneous texture. Surfaces are where radiant energy is reflected or absorbed, where vibrations are passed to the medium, where vaporization or diffusion into the medium occur, and what our bodies come up against in touch. So far as perception is concerned, surfaces are therefore 'where most of the action is' (Gibson 1979, 23). (Ingold 2007, 5)

I said, at the start of this section, that I had a desire for a temporal, material 'object', and that this desire arises out of the feeling that when we make music we are actually making *something*. We do speak of sound as having a 'surface', but that is not the sort of surface I want to explore: the surface 'where most of the action is' needs to be temporal, and to find a way to discuss that, I turn back to the writing of the French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard.

In his book, *The Dialectic of Duration* (Bachelard 1936) Bachelard attempts to show that the perception of duration is subject to a dialectic or duality. He argues for a sort of psychological duel between fullness and emptiness, where the moments of fullness have special meaning for us, because we have to work to fill them: " .. la durée, c'est une oeuvre ..": 'duration is a work', or in the terms of this discussion, something that has to be made and formed. However Bachelard is concerned not just with the internals of individual psychology but also with the connections and social implications of communal perception, and moments where we have a communal sense of fullness. The passage I find interesting is as follows:

(But) the equalisation of timing is already one of the great tasks of relational psychology. When one has effected this synchronisation, that is to say, when one has put precisely together two superpositions of two different psyches, one sees that one has almost all the attributes of physical adhesive bonding. The time of thought marks thought profoundly. Perhaps one is not thinking the same thing, but one thinks something at the same time. What a union! [my translation] (Bachelard 1936, ?)

And then actually about rhythm itself,

The beat acts as a signal, not as a mere duration. It binds into coincidences, binds rhythms into instants that will stand out.

This last comment is striking in that it figures something we might regard as a temporal ‘surface’: a resistant and distinctive encounter with something perceived, and - in Bachelard’s terms - perceived not just physically but psychologically, almost bumping the listener against the surfaces of ‘time-things’.

The impetus of this discussion has been to try to find an alternative to those accounts of music that think of time in terms of flow and ‘expectation’. My intuition that actual durations signify, and that the making and encountering of temporal quantities and qualities are critical activities in the act of musicking is informed by Eduardo Kohn’s account of semiosis in his book, *How Forests Think*, where he explores Charles Saunders Peirce’s notion of the sign. The next part of this project would be to consider social and signifying regimes within this materialist account of time.

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